

Socrates, Aspasia, and philosophy



Socrates, Alcibiades, and Aspasia (1801) - Nicolas André Monsiaux (1754-1837)

The word for ‘love’ used by Socrates, erōtika, literally ‘matters concerning Eros’ or ‘the domain of the erotic’, sounds like the Greek word erōtan, which means ‘to ask questions’. Since Socrates has made a name for himself as a thinker who has only questions, not answers, perhaps the comment conceals an ironic pun.¹

– Armand D’Angour, *Socrates in Love*

Part I – out of nowhere?

In medieval philosophy, largely dominated by the Scholastics, the moniker “*The Philosopher*” was given to the *only* ancient thinker then deemed worthy of the description: Aristotle. This was largely due to the Islamic tradition for whom Aristotle was central, and which had preserved, translated, thoroughly studied, and built whole philosophies on Aristotle while Europe was wallowing in the so-called Dark Ages. The Islamic world, at the time, was the center of cultural sophistication and, in effect, held Aristotle in trust (and much of ancient Greek thought) for European culture while it got over its bad period.² *The Philosopher’s* sober³ comprehensiveness came to suggest the need to order Christian doctrine rationally, and offered conceptual tools for the task. Modern European thought was emerging and Aristotle was there to help...

Where did Aristotle get his start?

He was a student of Plato. In the late Medieval period, Plato’s work was finally re-discovered by Western Europe, having made its way into Latin and later modern European languages. Now the philosophical spotlight shifted to Plato’s dialogues and their manner of illustrating intellectual development. Answers come from questions. Questions, which and how to ask them, enacted in the dialogues, set the stage for the Enlightenment. The Platonic revival accelerated and continued into the early 20th Century, culminating with Alfred North Whitehead describing the European philosophical tradition as “footnotes to Plato...”

1. See also the SEP entry on “[Plato on Friendship and Love](#).”

2. “[Arabic translators did far more than just preserve Greek philosophy](#),” Peter Adamson, Aeon, 2016.

3. In contrast, say, to Plato with his extravagant abstractions.

Where did Plato get his inspiration?

From Socrates, Plato's early teacher, and the chief question-asking character in his dialogues.

And Socrates, whence his ideas?

The Pre-Socratics?... *No.*

Socrates, the philosopher, has been a bit of a mystery in Western philosophy. He seems to have come out of the blue. His thought was not a clear development of his philosophical predecessors. He was aware of them, was even a protégé of one in his youth, was exposed to all their speculative answers about what the world was made of and what made it tick. But he found it all unsatisfying and went a very different way. He focused not on questions about the stuff and workings of the world so much as about the people who claimed to know these things – virtually, it seemed, *everyone* around him. How did this turn of thought happen and why?

The first thing to note about Socrates is that he did not propound answers. He was about the questions. If the questions suggest answers, these will just occasion more questions. An answer to a question is an invitation to more questions.⁴ Did he even have ideas of his own? Or was he exclusively about method and style? If so, where did these come from? What was so original about Socrates? Why is he such a watershed in the history of philosophy that it is divided into those that came before him, him, and those that come after?

The Socrates described and illustrated in Plato's dialogues underwent character development from an early gadfly persona, more provocateur than theoretician, to the sock puppet for mouthing Plato's ideas in the later dialogues. Leaving aside Plato, as much as possible,⁵ what makes Socrates unique and important among Greek thinkers? He asked questions about piety (or loyalty), the nature of knowledge, courage, the point of education, the nature of the good, the beautiful, truth, justice, love, the right way to live... etc., but he seems always to leave deconstructed any answers proposed by others – and, at least when he was not ventriloquizing Plato, did not propose any of his own. His questions are directed at *understanding* what others claim to know about these subjects. How did these others arrive at their notions and solutions? "Understanding" is not merely successful information transmission; it implies grasping as much about the source, the evidence, the speaker, the conveyor of the information, the context of background beliefs and their source. It is as much about these as any clarity about the

4. See, for example, the notorious application of the Socratic method in law school as depicted in the ["skull full of mush" clip](#) from the classic film *The Paper Chase*. Socrates, himself, however, was far gentler in his interrogations than what is typical in adversarial legal contexts.

5. Say what you might about Plato's hijacking of the historic figure of Socrates for his own ends, but Plato remains, at least in the early dialogues, the most authoritative source for what we know about his mentor. Plato doesn't quite lie about Socrates, but he leaves a lot out, either from ignorance or from a wish to keep his beloved teacher a simple and intellectually pure figure. But Plato is *not* our only authority. There is Xenophon, another student, who, though less philosophically sophisticated than Plato, was equally impressed by Socrates' integrity. But Xenophon seems to have had less of an axe to grind and presents Socrates, the man – as opposed to ideas inspired by him – more dispassionately than Plato. And there are enough scraps of information from myriad other sources that offer grist for an attempt at fleshing out the historical Socrates. Ideas have a *history*. In light of extant sources of information about Socrates, including newly discovered hints, Oxford classicist Armand D'Angour attempts a reconstruction of the *youthful* Socrates in his recent book, *Socrates in Love*. The book will inform our discussion.

information conveyed through an “answer.” Socrates makes no great claims for himself. He takes, it seems, almost perverse pride in saying he, himself, knows nothing – his interpretation of what a priestess oracle had said about him. She said he was the “wisest” man in Athens. *Knowing nothing*, then, he concluded, must be what wisdom is – what the oracle said he had plenty of. Was this false modesty, was he being disingenuous? He insisted again and again, *no*. The assessment can be annoying when it seems to imply to those claiming to have answers that they know even less. They *think* they *know* things. Under examination, they show themselves to be, not knowers, but “wise” – maybe wiser than they thought, that is to say, like him, Socrates, *ignorant*.⁶

His “ignorance” is often remarked – less so than the fact that, on one occasion, Socrates declaims on a subject about which he says he *knows* something. It occurs in the *Symposium*, a singular dialogue describing a drinking party, where he announces he knows something about *love* – and he says he learned it from a woman, Diotima. What he learned from this – commonly thought “fictional” – woman seeded ideas that to this day permeate philosophical thinking: the move from the particular to the general, from the concrete and temporal to the abstract and eternal. It is the first step in an attempt to get to the bottom of things, *the definitional quest*. Human physical love, so Diotima teaches Socrates in that dialogue, because of its intensity and promise and our receptiveness to the lure of physical beauty – never wholly realizable but ever tantalizing – is an invitation to ponder and exercise our capacity to “rise above,” so to speak, “all of this” to a vision of how things *might* be – even if perennially out of reach to mortals. Pondering our limitations *vis-à-vis* this vision is what philosophy is all about.⁷

Wittgenstein in the 20th Century would describe his philosophical insights as rungs on a ladder for climbing to something beyond – the ladder itself, only a provisional crutch, was meant to be discarded.⁸ He was no Platonist – implying we could anticipate arriving at a permanent place of intellectual rest or enlightenment – but he echoes the notion that philosophy is *more of a journey than a destination* as was already present in what Socrates claims to have learned from Diotima. And this is a stark contrast to pre-Socratic philosophical obsessions with answers to *physical* questions. Not that Diotima was a pre-Platonist, but Plato’s ideal Forms – and all the conceptual machinery of thought that has since derived from it – all the “-isms” and concepts of philosophy – we can see as ossified traces of a path *she* inaugurated in her conversations with Socrates.⁹

Socrates didn’t write anything, or if he did, he never gives any indication that, as a time-stamped piece of wisdom, it deserved to be preserved. Fleeting dialogue is less prone to be taken as definitive, less likely to be taken as a final word. Something written might be mistaken for an *answer*, and he, as we said, was all about *questions*. E. M. Cioran, in the 20th Century, noted this about Socrates and, indeed comes closer than anyone I am aware to being a modern version of Socrates, down to his wandering the streets to engage anyone who had nothing better to do in conversations about what mattered or was most important. Cioran, of course, *did* write but was careful to embrace contradiction and eschew

6. Hence, his reputation as a master of irony (which impressed and inspired Kierkegaard, for instance, and a good part of postmodernism). Is this humility or arrogance? Is there a difference? Someone who *claims not* to know the answers *does* seem to claim he or she *knows* something.

7. Philosophy has been judged a consolation prize ([Boethius](#)). The word means “love of wisdom,” and if *wisdom is ignorance*, and we are ignorant, we might as well revel in it, even learn to love it. The love offers us motivation to keep showing ourselves as such. “What privilege! To be the only sort of animal that worries about these things – that frets about how stupid *it* is... And speaking of ‘love’? What is that?” – Bianco Luno.

8. As implied in his famous lines, “He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly. / Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.” *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Section 7, Ogden-Ramsey translation.

9. This is the argument D’Angour makes and which we discuss below.

system as a way to hinder the temptation to finality. These thinkers were outsiders and would talk to anybody willing: in Socrates' case, from aristocrats to ordinary women and men; for the nocturnal Cioran, it was street prostitutes and Nobel Prize winning playwrights. Humans all. They had stories to tell or takes on experience. Philosophy *must* have its roots in the experience and thinking of ordinary people going about ordinary things if it's to have genuine *universal* relevance: something Socrates, Wittgenstein, and Cioran took seriously.

And in the Western tradition, the woman who inspired and taught Socrates seems to be the first on record to have pressed the humanistic and practical aspects of serious thinking about ideas. Aspasia was noted for what today we might call "couples counseling," which, it turns out, demands skills not that different from international dispute mediation or finding a stable definition or understanding of a divisive or vague term or notion on which deep convictions with far reaching consequences are founded. Aspasia, by many accounts, was accomplished at all three types of mediation or intellectual intervention. Her insights into dispute resolution and how to effectively persuade audiences of what they needed to hear had Athenian aristocrats lining up to hear her out on these matters. She authored famous speeches for her husband/consort Pericles that were in part responsible for his successful rise to power and influence in the Greek world – for as long as that lasted. She clearly advised him on all manner of foreign and domestic relations. He valued her advice, though he didn't always follow it, sometimes to his chagrin. Her insight into human psychology and her skills at manipulating it were widely recognized in her time. These skills also happen to be essential to what came to be called [dialectic](#) in philosophy: the *logic* that emerges from *rhetorical* interventions. Conversations with Aspasia set Socrates on the path to refining *the method* still attributed to him.¹⁰

That method is the other striking thing about Socrates as a philosopher. It remains ubiquitous and critical to inquiry. We recognize it in courtroom dramas, detective stories, in cogent political or domestic accusations, preaching, and *all over the place* in philosophy – any situation where a sobering point is wanting to be made. It is called the *elenchus* or the "Socratic method" of inquiry.¹¹ (See Part II below.) It is a peculiar kind of questioning procedure where the inquirer does not really ask questions they don't already have a clue as to the answer. You don't expect surprises using the method. You already know the answer, if you have done your homework, so to speak. You know what there is to know *even if that is not much*. Little or nothing is an easy thing to know. You just want to make something clear and evident to those concerned, something problematic, that calls for at least acknowledgment if not explanation. This method is the other innovation that explains why Socrates is seen as marking the beginning of much of the Western philosophical tradition.

And how did Socrates come up with his method? Armand D'Angour, a classicist at Oxford and familiar with many of the ancient sources of what we know of Socrates, the people around him, and the world he lived in, recently published a book *Socrates in Love* in which he argues, based on ignored and recently discovered hints, in-your-face evidence, and informed speculation (i.e., "inferences to the best explanation") that Socrates got "his" method from a woman as well. The one in the painting, Aspasia – moreover, she was the *same* woman who taught him about love.

10. We might gather this from circumstantial evidence which we will address, shortly.

11. The *elenchus* or Socratic method of question and answer is a way of exploring some accepted view or belief or dogma or definition or conclusion or understanding... The investigation seeks to reveal cause to reconsider first impressions or knee-jerk reactions. It is a cornerstone of [legal education](#), for example. What is common between *this* case and others, since one of the ends of law is its *consistent* application? *Justifications* are required for consistency. For which, *clarity*, in turn is required. You want to persuade third parties of the rationality of decisions, hence the need for consistency... Or risk losing the respect necessary for deference. (E.g., [Dr. Anthony Fauci and Covid-19 remedies](#).)

Diotima was, in fact, Aspasia. Thus, both Socrates' method *and* his core teaching, scant though these may seem, owe much to this woman.

We will look at the idea of love in Diotima, how it prefigures transcendent moves in much philosophical thinking, Aspasia's method, its ubiquity, what is known about her, Socrates, and might be guessed about their relationship, and their world. And why it has taken so long to figure out that a woman was there at the start.¹²

Aspasia's legacy

Socrates and Aspasia met. That is beyond dispute. That they were friends for most of their lives is less settled but likely. That their relationship may have been more complex and intimate than even that, classicist Armand D'Angour argues in his book *Socrates in Love*. Other independent scholars also suggest that the connection was a deep, sustained, and intellectually fruitful one – to say the least.



They were both about twenty when they first met. Five years later she would take up with Pericles, the most powerful man in the Greek World at the time. D'Angour suggests that her "friending" of Socrates may have caused him to displace his passion *for* her onto ideals suggested *by* her – ideals about a more enduring and inexhaustible love than any worldly, carnal sort. Socrates may have thought, "if I can't have her, maybe I can make a life-project of pursuing the vision she, herself, implanted in me." This heterocosmic ploy may have worked better than even she expected. Later, she would chastise him for having gone too far in curtailing his earthly interests and ambitions. The messy world of Athenian politics and public service, a highly corrupted and corrupting human environment, she sought to remind him, cried out for a dose of his integrity and "wisdom." After the death of Pericles, Aspasia scolded Socrates: Athens was crumbling and could have benefited from his intelligence and disinterested insight if only he would choose to embrace opportunities that were open to him. Socrates was, by this time, not a nobody in Athens, evidenced by the fact that he had both enemies and friends in high places, not least because of his close association with Pericles' family and circle, including her – arguably, the most important (notoriously so, in the eyes of her enemies) woman in the Greek world for a time, in part – but *only* in part – because of her attachment to Pericles.

Pericles adored Aspasia. This was so unsecret that his political enemies portrayed him as her cuckold. If she hinted a war should start, he would start a war. To disastrous effect, Pericles' enemies were happy to point out. She was accused of running a high end brothel of foreign women in the service of which she conscripted Pericles and all the resources he could command. She was not even Pericles' legitimate spouse, the talk was, since foreign women could not, by law, marry aristocratic Athenian men – a law

12. In many ways, the place of Aspasia in Western philosophy is even more significant than the cases involving [Kant and Maria von Herbert and her challenge to a consequence of Kant's moral theory](#), and the [important role that the women in his life played in the self-conception of Bertrand Russell and how this contrasts with the impact of Lou Andreas-Salomé in the life and thought of Friedrich Nietzsche](#). (We plan a future discussion of René Descartes and the critique of his radical separation of mind and body – a problem that still plagues modern philosophy of mind and consciousness – first proposed forcefully in correspondence with his contemporary, Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia. Then, there is the case of Kierkegaard and Regina: in consequence, most similar to the Aspasia/Socrates story... Love can change the history of ideas.)

Pericles, himself, wishing to enhance the solidarity of his city-state, had promulgated before ever meeting her. The Athenian aristocratic blood line was jealously guarded to the point that Athenian women were virtually held prisoners in their homes, not educated, not allowed to shop at public markets for fear they might mix with foreigners leading to non-Athenian incursions into the purity of the Athenian tribe. Not all of the Greek world shared this form of eugenicism. [Sparta](#) famously didn't.¹³ Athens stood out in this way. As Aspasia stood out in Athens. Miletus, the Ionian Greek city-state where Aspasia was from, [a hotbed of pre-Socratic intellectual culture](#), was far less worried about the consequences of educating aristocratic daughters. Aspasia, indications are, was an exemplar. Extraordinary anywhere, she would have been a spectacle in Athens.

As luck would have it, Pericles fell in love with a woman that he could not marry,¹⁴ Aspasia. She was not a citizen of Athens,¹⁵ though of the highest social status, education, and critical intelligence. More, she soon showed herself extraordinarily talented at dispute mediation whether between domestic partners or political states. Her skills at crafting public orations able to stir and move crowds was also highly regarded and she was sought after as a teacher of these arts. In so far as women were allowed any public status in Athens, she had it, in droves. Her reputation as a teacher of how to be a properly civilized Athenian citizen filled her salons.¹⁶ Her assured inter-human know-how qualified her to train the ambitious in statecraft... And with Pericles, leader in the Greek world, in tow, she was poised to be a favorite target of ridicule and slander by his political enemies. He would go to war, it was rumored, if she so much as hinted it would be a good idea.

But unlike the mercenary sophists who peddled similar skills, she was, on most reliable accounts, devotedly public-spirited.¹⁷ What motive beyond what she perceived as best for all concerned in her adopted state could be attributed to her? Was she ambitious? Yes. Was she pragmatic? Yes. Did she, nevertheless, appreciate high ideals? Yes... Ask Socrates.

The young Socrates

Why would someone with the popular image, persisting to this day, of an unkempt, barefoot, grimy, eccentric, unprepossessing, professional annoyer of people on the street,¹⁸ have to do with Aspasia or anyone in her circle? It appears that there was a significant and lasting relationship between them. Though Socrates was not from an aristocratic family as Aspasia and many of those in the Periclean circle were, neither was he a mere stone mason (with the suggestion of being like a “bricklayer”). “Sculptor” is closer – at least he had such training. Plato knew Socrates only during the last decade of the latter’s life. He portrays Socrates as unkempt enough to be mistaken for homeless. If he seemed a bit shabby in Plato’s accounts, it was from a conscious choice on Socrates’ part, made long before, to forgo inessential material diversions from his mission.

13. At least Spartan eugenics was, in a modern, “transhumanist” sense, more rational. Physical health and strength were selected for. The Athenian version appears more superstitious – something about keeping the race “pure,” for its own sake.

14. It is suggested he may have arranged a change in the law to accommodate his marriage to her.

15. Aspasia was, however, of the same ancestral clan as Pericles.

16. If Meetup philosophy clubs had existed there and then, hers would have been the cream of the crop.

17. Her “dumping” of Socrates for Pericles after the first five years of her acquaintance and possibly love affair with the young philosopher, may have been a strategic result of her need to be involved in the greater affairs of state.

18. “Behind the scenes,” perhaps, but not so behind the scenes that she did not incur the wrath and venom of Pericles’ political enemies and jealous Athenian women.

Piecing together circumstantial hints and suggestions, D'Angour concludes that Socrates was from a family of respected artisans, solidly middle, if not upper middle, class. His father Sophroniscus headed a business of artisan stone workers who created some to the architectural monuments we see on buildings like the Parthenon. There is evidence that Sophroniscus was an architectural consultant to Pericles or to his decision-making circles at the peak of Athenian cultural ascendancy. His associates were from Pericles' aristocratic circle. Socrates is known to have grown up on the fringes of this circle. In his late teens, Socrates entered as a hoplite the Athenian military – one which, unlike modern armies, consisted only of the sons of aristocrats or those able to afford the hefty price of supplying their own fighting equipment. His father's resources must have permitted this.¹⁹ Socrates inherited his father's business, and, presumably, while not rich, had enough to provide for his wife²⁰ and children without needing to carry on manually in the family business. He was, after all, able to afford, in the eyes of many Athenians, to waste his time wandering the streets and markets of Athens harassing citizens with pointless questions about what everybody knew already.

Xanthippe, Socrates' second and much younger wife, is known to have had a pedigree higher than one would expect for the wife of a mere craftsman. That said, Socrates, is admired by some (notably, including Xanthippe herself) for speaking to everyone as though they were equals: men or women, natives or foreigners, young or old, high-born or not. He, unlike most educated Athenian men, would have had no qualms having philosophical discussions with a foreign woman. This, among other things, made Socrates "weird," an outsider in his native Athens. As Aspasia was – if for different reasons.

Again, Aspasia and Socrates were young, the same age, about 20, she perhaps slightly older than him, when they likely first met in the Periclean circle and began their conversations.

More evidence



Both Aspasia and Socrates came to share the loss and waste of *his* young protege and *her* grand nephew, Alcibiades. The young charge had movie-star looks, was dashing, charming, ambitious, loyal, but headstrong and a bit of scoundrel in whom few Socratic virtues took hold. He ended up scheming himself to an early ignominious death. D'Angour suggests Socrates may have displaced his frustrated love for her onto her grandnephew. So Alcibiades' death in his prime must have been a shared heartbreak for the two later in their lives. Socrates and Aspasia may as well have been Alcibiades' foster parents.

To backtrack...

Socrates at seventeen had visited the Ionian coastal Greek colonies with his then mentor Archelaus, himself a student of Anaxagoras. (Further evidence that Socrates was connected to the cultured and educated Athenian class.) Ionia, modern day western Turkey, was a center of pre-Socratic philosophy. Aspasia, a native of Ionia, specifically, of the

19. Though Socrates himself downplayed it, he was to become celebrated for his skill, strength, and courage on the battlefield.

20. Or wives – he had two, more or less – for awhile [concurrently](#), rumor had it. His first wife, Myrto, whom he knew since childhood and who bore him two sons, died early, but not before her friend and Socrates' second wife, [Xanthippe](#) was already part of the household. See [Sententiae Antiquae](#) for more on Socrates' two wives.

city-state of Miletus, a few years after Socrates' visit, would migrate with her older sister's family and new husband to Athens. Alcibiades the Elder, was her sister's husband, an Athenian Greek political figure and soon to be father of Cleineas, an important Athenian general, who in turn would father Alcibiades the Younger (the young man in the painting), making him Aspasia's grand nephew. Cleinias was killed in battle, leaving the preadolescent Alcibiades in the charge of Cleinias' friend, Pericles and his household, which included Aspasia... and Socrates, who was already on the family periphery. Besides their age, the two had other things in common. They were part of the same extended circle, recognized as young intellectuals but also as outsiders or eccentrics: Socrates, not just because of his passionate inquisitiveness but also because of his sometimes strange behavior. He would freeze in place unpredictably for long periods, seemingly oblivious to the world. (Modern diagnoses suggest catatonia.) Aspasia, of course, because of her striking feminine beauty, education, and intellect – things that did *not* go together in Athens at the time.

Alcibiades was born the same year Socrates and Aspasia are likely to have become acquainted (450 BCE). Left fatherless at a tender age, the boy was eighteen years younger than Aspasia's philosopher friend Socrates. Not the handsomest guy in Athens (especially, viewed side by side, as he often was, with Alcibiades), Socrates was, nevertheless brilliant, brawny, known to be fearless both intellectually and otherwise. He would soon prove himself on the battlefield. If he lacked something highly prized in her circles, it was military or political ambition. Ambition, let's say, is not so rare as the complex of Socrates' other virtues. There was plenty of ambition in Aspasia's family, including in herself. But she could have known no one better suited to be the young man's mentor. She may very well have recommended Socrates to Pericles as the best role-model a young man could have. In any case, chief mentor is what Socrates became for the young Alcibiades.

Socrates grew to love the young man, and it was reciprocated. (He would go on to have three biological sons of his own who apparently never amounted to much.) The young Alcibiades seemed to have everything going for him, privilege, a model of Greek masculine beauty, and – unlike Socrates – not a small amount of ambition and worldly promise. Alcibiades loved Socrates, not just as a father-figure and mentor, but erotically, recounting in the *Symposium* how he tried to seduce the older man but was gently rebuffed. Socrates famously saved Alcibiades in battle when the two were assigned tent mates in the battle of Potidaea during the first of the Peloponnesian wars. Alcibiades went down in the heat of battle and was about to be killed when Socrates, a skillful, physically-imposing, and seasoned fighter, fought off the attackers, and bore the wounded young man and his heavy armor to safety. Afterwards, Socrates happily declined honors, knowing that a picture of bravery in battle would better serve Alcibiades' future political plans than his own. The daring charge at the enemy, let it be celebrated. That it was also a bit daft and required his being saved by a man almost twice his age could be downplayed. But others did not forget Socrates' heroism, Alcibiades, in particular.

Alcibiades was fated to an inglorious end. His impetuosity, wiliness, if not quite savvy, found him involved in international intrigues over his head, finally landing him tried, imprisoned, and executed in his prime. Aspasia and Socrates, two of the wisest mentors any young person could have had, were powerless to avoid watching the train wreck of his life.

But the relevance of Alcibiades to the story here is that he serves as yet another link between Aspasia and Socrates – as the Monsiaux painting captures.

Much later, as noted, Aspasia would urge Socrates to involve himself in Athenian politics, especially after the death of Pericles, when the city sorely needed wise guidance. But Socrates was beyond thinking he had anything to offer his polis but the humbler service of having been a good and loyal soldier in its defense and, once past the age for that, as figurative midwife (his mother's literal profession) to some measure of thoughtfulness in the minds of his friends and anyone he could engage on the streets of Athens. Ambition for things more worldly than these was gone, if it was ever in him.

As it turned out, however, even these modest ambitions were enough to get him killed.²¹ That philosophy could touch a nerve and be seen to pose a threat worthy of execution is revealing. The rest is history... the history of philosophy.



Notice who is explaining and who is listening.

21. The irony is that he escaped death so many times on the battle-field only to be sentenced to exile or death by the civil authorities of the state he valiantly defended.

Still more...

Then there is the famous account in the [Symposium](#) of a mysterious teacher of Socrates in his youth, cited as “Diotima” by Plato, from whom, Socrates claims, he learned all about love. He never speaks of any of his contemporaries or predecessors as being eye-opening teachers to him in any philosophically meaningful way, *except* Diotima – and, in another dialogue, the [Menexenus](#), where he mentions Aspasia by name as his teacher in oratorical skills.

D’Angour points out that in Greek “Diotima” translates as “loved by Zeus.” Pericles at the height of his influence during this time was popularly nicknamed “Zeus.” And everybody knew that the Athenian leader “Zeus” was entranced by Aspasia, conspicuously kissing her twice each day. There is no other record of any woman by the name of Diotima in the Greek sources. If there had been and she was revered by Socrates as a teacher of the only thing he admits to “knowing,” one would think others would have remarked. It has often been assumed that she was a fiction, made-up by Plato, until D’Angour’s suggestion that it was otherwise.

Since Plato knew – and expected his audience to know – *who* Aspasia was, supposing “Diotima” was referring to her, why would he have been compelled to alter her name? Why would Plato not just call Socrates’ teacher in the *Symposium* on the subject of love “Aspasia” if, in fact, that is who Diotima was?

It is relevant that Aspasia was viewed with suspicion by Pericles’ enemies of which he had many. And by the time of the writing of the dialogue (long after Pericles, Socrates, and Aspasia were all dead) these detractors were in ascendancy. Knowing Pericles had adored and deferred to her, slandering *her* was a way to get at *him*. She was accused of starting wars to supply her high-end brothel, staffed with foreign women. Athenian women were excluded from these privilege circles, they were virtually house-bound breeders of the pure superior Athenian bloodline. Such restrictions didn’t endear Aspasia to them either. As a foreign woman, she was easy to target. Her famed intellectual salons, attended even by a young Plato were easy to see as fronts for attracting well-paying men as customers. The [Ghislaine Maxwell](#) of her time – to credit the rumors – the name Aspasia, especially in the years following of Pericles death and Athenian political decay and decline, had fallen from grace. She and anyone associated with her had become politically incorrect. Plato, in particular, would have nothing compromising said about his dead idol, Socrates.

Plato and Xenophon, the most reliable philosophical sources of the time, are at least circumspect, if not, non-committal in referring to her – even as they portray Socrates, himself, as deferential toward her. Nowhere, however, D’Angour points out, do they repeat the slander, which mostly stemmed from the popular comedians, for whom scandal sold. Virtue had fallen on hard times.

After all, the sophists *also* did what Aspasia was known for. They specialized in teaching effective rhetoric – typically from mercenary motives. But no one, not even Plato, as much as he despised sophists, denied that effectively communicating to the less than perfectly rational element in humanity was critically important. That *seduction, no less than deduction, is requisite when attempting the edification human beings* is a particularly Aspasian insight. Rhetoric, itself, was not the problem. Aspasia’s famed efforts in this direction were convincingly motivated by civic and moral concerns – we may guess, to judge from her privileged circumstances (she didn’t need money), from the evidence

in the *Menexenus*,²² (which offers a impressive sample of her ability) and from the fact that Socrates – nobody’s fool, *not even his own* – in that dialogue expresses his admiration, citing her work as an example to others. The gossip and slander trailing her aside, he remained fascinated with and retained the highest respect for her until the end of his life. A regard she returned. While he is known for suffering fools gently, he did tend to move on: better a different fool than the same one repeatedly. His relationship and regard for Aspasia lasted for half a century, from his twenties until his death near seventy...

Speaking of which, on his deathbed, as recounted in the *Phaedo*, there is the mysterious offering to the god of healing Asclepius which, Socrates reminds Crito, he owes. *These are his last words*. Whose recovery from illness was he wishing to give thanks for? Not his wife, Xanthippe, she had just been led out of the room grief-stricken, but not sick, with their young child. Certainly, not himself. Robust as in his youth, even at near seventy, no one ever mentions Socrates ever suffering from any *physical* ailment. (Unless *philosophy* itself was the ailment, but Socrates *never* recovered from that.) D’Angour suggests it was Aspasia, also near seventy – who, though she recovered and went onto live another decade or more, had, around this time, been reported gravely ill. No one else seems to fit the available evidence.

If it was Aspasia Socrates was thinking about, it is almost comic the casualness with which Socrates interrupts his execution to remember her. (See Appendix 3.)

Plato was homosexual and hence not likely to have let either negative or positive *personal* passions interfere with his assessment of Aspasia. He was in a position to know better the real story around Aspasia and while having no particular reason to perpetuate the slander, also did not want her tarnished reputation in the eyes of the Athenian mob to rub off on his beloved dead mentor, Socrates. He knew those in the know would recognize who was meant by “Diotima” without needing to make it explicit. He was motivated to downplay the Aspasia/Socrates connection and significance, and it is his accounts in the early dialogues that have informed ever since what we know of Socrates, the man: the picture of an old, eccentric, ugly, shabby genius who seemed to come out of nowhere to enlighten the world about its endarkened state.

But Socrates came *from* somewhere. He was once a young man in love with a woman whom, though he never possessed, he never stopped revering as friend and teacher. To the end...

And if that were not enough...

We also have this bit of third-hand gossip: Before she was “with” Pericles, the most powerful man in the Greek world for a time, Aspasia was “with” Socrates, according to Aristoxenus and Clearchus of Soli,²³ students of Aristotle and possible descendants of those who knew Socrates personally. What exactly did “with” mean? Were they acquaintances, friends, or something more? There is good

22. In the Platonic dialogue *Menexenus*, Socrates recounts a famous oration she authored. The dialogue also contains a playful jab at her, consistent with a “close” informal relationship as well. The dialogue has sometimes been dismissed as a of satire of rhetoric and Aspasia as its practitioner. D’Angour takes issue and suggest it coheres better with other evidence that Socrates intended an homage to the abilities of a friend with whom such informality was permissible.

23. Aristoxenus does not seem to have been friendly to either Plato or, his teacher, Socrates. Was the innuendo malicious gossip? A statement of fact? Add to this that Aristotle was not quite as taken with Socrates as Plato... We need to interpolate between the motives of friends and enemies.

evidence for the first two, and hints of the last.²⁴ She was clearly *with* Pericles in the intimate sense: she had a child with him. The same preposition used with reference to Socrates is suggestive. The Greek [preposition](#) Aristoxenus and Clearchus use leaves as much to the imagination as the English.

Part II – the idea and the method

Diotima/Aspasia on love

We, following D'Angour, will interpret Diotima's message to Socrates in the *Symposium* regarding the love beauty may inspire:

Beauty *here* is a bit of a tease. Like a trailer for a movie. Designed to get you started on a path *hopefully* to experiencing the *real* thing. Which does not fade and never dies... In this way, Beauty relates to the other two transcendentals in the Platonic foyer, the True and the Good.

"Hopefully..." because the trailer isn't the movie or a substitute for it or even an accurate suggestion of it... Beauty *here* is melancholy. To avoid disappointment you must postpone consummation²⁵ – *forever...* And find this sustainable. Somehow.²⁶

Philosophy is *love of* wisdom, *not* its possession. Socrates, unlike his predecessors or successors, never stopped trying to hammer home this point. (See Appendix 2 below for the origin of this idea.)

Plato's foyer was an entry to a place of the immaterial, esoteric, mystical, forever out of reach, eternal, and incorruptible. A place, it seemed to him, as to Pythagoras before him, as empirically intractable as the correspondence of a mathematical idea with anything material. Needless to say, a lot of more down-to-earth philosophers since (and before), beginning with Aristotle were reluctant to follow Plato this far.

Socrates represents a steadfast agnosticism regarding the efficacy of reason to get us to Plato's foyer – *or anywhere else*. He was forever prepared to fight to stay in the doorway of belief. Not going through but not backing out of it. Too many unanswered questions stood in the way of either.

Perhaps, it is a rare acquired taste, this standing in doorways: forget her and get on with your life, or back away and pretend she never existed. He chose not to choose. There would be no forgetting and no pretending.

The Aspasiatic/Socratic method

24. There was a five year interval between when Aspasia and Socrates first met as 20 year olds and when she took up with Pericles.

25. The intimation here of [post coitum triste](#) first occurs in the oldest piece of literature in the western world, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. It is a very ancient trope. Aristotle and many since went on to comment on it.

26. This particular expression of the Socratic project as inspired by Aspasia/Diotima is from Bianco Luno, but the [SEP entry](#) by C. D. C. Reeve, cited at the start, suggests, "Socrates may be the master of foreplay, of arousing desire, and may to that extent be a master of the art of love, but when it comes to satisfying desire, he is a failure."

According to Cicero's Aeschines, Aspasia invented a kind of *ἐπαγωγή* [roughly, induction]: the form of cross-examination in which an interlocutor responds to several uncontroversial examples and the questioner finds a general principle fitting all the responses. "The principle will then undermine what the interlocutor had said or claimed to believe about the controversial subject at hand"...

– Irina Deretić²⁷

It is an ancient logical trick, *reductio ad absurdum*: assume a claim your interlocutor makes is true. Show carefully, step by step, that if their point is true, and certain rules of reasoning acknowledged by you *and* your interlocutor are valid, then something unacceptable, crazy, irrational, embarrassing,... absurd follows.

If you succeed at showing this, then you have undercut the initial claim: you may conclude either that

1. the original claim *cannot* be held, or
2. something *else* must follow from the original claim than was initially proposed,²⁸ or
3. you *and* your interlocutor are wrong to have acknowledged the rules of reasoning you *both* did.²⁹

Aspasia is reputed to have used this trick often in her mediation practice, and we don't have a clear record of anyone *before her* in the Western philosophical tradition making an impression by employing it. It seems Socrates took the idea and ran with it. It is his signature method in the early Platonic dialogues... (Today, we find it in law schools, in Congressional hearings, [TV detectives](#), [Hollywood](#), etc.)

A fragment of Aspasia's method occurs in a lost book by Aeschines and survives because it was cited by the Roman philosopher Cicero centuries later. Here we quote it with commentary from scholar of ancient Greek philosophy, Irina Deretić:

Aspasia is represented very favorably by Socratic philosophers such as Xenophon and Aeschines of Sphettus. The latter wrote a dialogue bearing her name. In *De Inventione*, Cicero cites parts of the dialogue written by Aeschines, in which Aspasia interrogates both Xenophon's wife and himself. Cicero acknowledges Aspasia's clever form of reasoning by employing her examples of *ἐπαγωγή* in his own argumentation chapter. First, Aspasia questions Xenophon's spouse, and then Xenophon himself in the same fashion:

"I wish you would tell me, Xenophon," she said, "if your neighbor had a better horse than yours, would you prefer your horse or his?"

"His," was the answer.

"And if he had a better farm than you have, which farm would you prefer to have?"

"The better farm, naturally," he said.

"Now, if he had a better wife than you have, would you prefer yours or his?"

And at this, Xenophon, too, himself was silent. (*De Inventione* [I.31.51–52])

27. Irina Deretić, "[Aspasia: Woman in Crises](#)," from *Women in Times of Crisis*, edited by Irina Deretić, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade, 2021.

28. There's an old logician's joke: one person's *reductio* is another's *modus ponens*. E.g.: 1. An all-good, all-powerful, all-knowing God exists; 2. there is a massive amount of evil in the world that only a powerful, omniscient God could have pulled off; 3. therefore, God is a jerk.

29. This last escape path is rarely availed except, perhaps, by authoritative logicians, such as [Graham Priest](#).

After Aspasia's cross-examination, both spouses were ashamed: Xenophon's wife blushed, and Xenophon was silent. These emotional reactions are analogous to the responses of Socrates' interlocutors who become ashamed when acknowledging that their beliefs are false because Socrates shows their inconsistency. Shame does not always block the thinking of an ashamed person; it rather calls their attention to the fact that something is wrong with one's argument that thus requires further thought and revision, if not abandonment. As for Xenophon and his wife, they are also aware that they made an error in reasoning.³⁰

This is *not* how the pre-Socratics typically argued, if they "argued" at all... they propounded. This way of assessing a claim is at the heart of the dialectical and "Socratic" methods.

Here are three short video expositions, ranging from the dry to the titillating:

1. [Socrates and the Socratic Method of Critical Thinking](#) – Lee Kerckhove
2. [Socratic Method: So, you *think* you know what a chair is?](#) – Daniel Bonevac
3. [Truth, Justice, and "the Essence of a Foot Massage" \(Or, what giving a "million" foot massages can do to your perception of reality\)](#)

Resources

1. Armand D'Angour, [Socrates in Love](#), Bloomsbury, 2019.
2. Armand D'Angour, "[Was the real Socrates more worldly and amorous than we knew?](#)" *Aeon*, 2019.
3. Armand D'Angour (Associate Professor of Classics in Jesus College, Oxford University) [talks about his recent project, Socrates in Love](#) (video) – a book about Socrates which "overturns standard views of Socrates as an old, ugly philosopher who walked around and did very little else until he was killed by the Athenian state by having to drink a cup of hemlock...", and attributes the core of Socrates' teachings to the brilliant Aspasia of Miletus. Armand explores questions such as "What might Socrates have been as a younger person... And what turned him into the kind of philosopher we associate with Socrates?...the ethical questions which are still very much the fare for philosopher thinkers: How should we live? What is knowledge? What is truth? What is justice? What is love? What is courage?... How should we live?" "What do we know about Socrates as a man that can throw light on Socrates as a thinker?" Filmed in London by Christos Sagias. Interviewed by Bettina Joy de Guzman.
4. Armand D'Angour [talks with Shute Festival director Bijan Omrani](#) (video) about his rediscovery of the central role that a woman of letters – Aspasia of Miletus – played in the life and thought of Socrates, the Father of Western Philosophy. Armand's radically new approach to

30. Irina Deretić, *op. cit.*

understanding the life and thought of Socrates is revealed in his book *Socrates in Love: The Making of a Philosopher*.

5. Irina Deretić, “[Aspasia: Woman in Crises](#),” from *Women in Times of Crisis*, edited by Irina Deretić, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade, 2021.
6. Though not inspired directly by (as far we know) D’Angour’s scholarly re-interpretation of the Aspasia/Socrates connection (it predates D’Angour’s study), the best-selling, tear-jerking, novel from Japan, also entitled [Socrates in Love](#), has an uncannily similar theme.
7. “[Greek Philosophy 7.1: Socrates’ Life and Methods](#),” Delphic Philosophy.
8. “[Greek Philosophy 7.2: Socrates’ Philosophy](#),” Delphic Philosophy.



*Extended writeup for the topic hosted at
[The Philosophy Club](#) in July 2022*

*– Víctor Muñoz
Guanajuato / Seattle*

Appendix

1. The *elenchos* (‘testing’ or ‘examination’) described

from *The Blackwell Companion to Philosophy*, 2nd Ed, (2003). Chapter 22, “Ancient Greek Philosophy,” Robert Wardy:

Thus Socratic *elenchos* is a matter of definition, yet vital questions concerning the nature and import of definition are not raised.

Once his partner has offered a candidate definition, Socrates typically proceeds by eliciting his support for further propositions. Sometimes the connection between these propositions and the original definition is immediately obvious, sometimes not; but the eventual result is always an argument using the definition whose conclusion either directly contradicts it, or at least conflicts with assumptions the interlocutor is not [587] willing to surrender. The outcome is consistently negative: Socratic ‘examination’ is refutation, establishing that a proposed definition of some

virtue is unacceptable because it entails contradiction directly or indirectly. Socrates concludes that his partner has no better grasp of the nature of that which is being defined, the *definiendum*, than he himself, and urges that they persevere in the definitional quest, since nothing could be more important than knowledge of what they demonstrably do not know.

It is noted that Socrates was interested in the *consistency* of a proposed definition rather than its truth, thinking it is the best we can hope for, in contrast to Plato later, who would go on to defend positive understandings. Socrates' relative agnosticism is a point of departure for Plato.³¹

[590] The real Socrates wrote nothing down; the Platonic Socrates is constantly engaged in argumentative discussion, but is not represented as going off to record his negative results in any sort of treatise. Doubtless in large measure as a consequence of the uniform failure of candidate definitions, Socratic philosophy is not a written product, but an oral process; it is something that happens between partners in dialectic, not a body of formulizable doctrine to be learnt by the passive reader. It is almost impossible to exaggerate the significance of this feature of Socratic practice, which survives with modifications throughout ancient philosophy.

2. D'Angour "connects dots" in his book, *Socrates in Love*:

It is in this milieu [Pericle's aristocratic circle] that, shortly after he turns twenty, Socrates encounters an extraordinary person who will change his life for ever. The energetic young Aspasia has arrived from Miletus with her family by her sister's marriage. People are gossiping about her throughout Athens; she is known for her beauty, eloquence, and education. She is happy to hold court in the house of her brother-in-law Alcibiades the Elder, chaperoned by other exotic women from her home city Miletus whom jealous Athenian wives speak of as 'prostitutes'. Unlike other women who Socrates has encountered – and he has made it his business to get to know quite a few – the fiery Aspasia is unconcerned about being seen talking to men and telling them what she thinks.

Wagging tongues say that Aspasia is running a brothel, but Socrates has frequented many brothels in his time and knows otherwise. He starts to make occasional visits to her quarters with some of his high-born young friends and their wives, whom she impresses with her eloquent insights into the nature of love and relationships. She shares with Socrates a love of discussion and debate, and, since Socrates is already marked out as an unconventional young man, he is unconcerned by her status as a non-Athenian and the disapproval that some express about her activities. As it is, his own chances of making a respectable marriage are impaired by the general perception of his eccentric behaviour, such as when he stands still in the middle of the street for long periods, deep in thought.

31. Plato leaves Socrates behind as his thought develops, inaugurating *the movement* Whitehead famously remarks on regarding the history of philosophy: that most, friends and critics alike, follow. Philosophy *tends* to return with regularity to what it was doing with the pre-Socratics. The back and forth "progress" or drama in the history of philosophy is, however, periodically interrupted with Socratic characters such as Diogenes of Sinope, Pascal, Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, Weil, and Cioran. A Socratic retrenchment can be detected in Derrida, for example.

When Socrates raises the subject of marriage with Aspasia, she makes clear that she knows better than he does what makes a good match: she is sought after by both sexes as a matchmaker, and for her advice about how to ensure a successful marriage. Meanwhile Pericles himself, though twice her age, is becoming no less captivated than Socrates by her beauty and intelligence, and Aspasia has her eye on making a beneficial liaison with Athens' most powerful man. In seeking to quell Socrates' disappointment, Aspasia presses him to answer what he thinks love really means, and presents him with her own doctrine of love and desire. *Love, she explains, begins with desire for a mate, but in the end it transcends mere physical desire. True love aims to bring out goodness in another person, and then to produce goodness that goes beyond that particular individual and makes an impact that lasts beyond one's own lifespan. Hard as it may be to accept the doctrine in practice, it strikes Socrates with extraordinary force. It will shape his thinking about the nature of the world, the transcendence of moral ideas, and the transmission of wisdom across generations.*

3. Asclepius and the final scene

in losing such a friend. Even before that Crito had been unable to restrain his tears, and had gone away; and Apollodorus, who had never once ceased weeping the whole time, burst into a loud wail and made us one and all break down by his sobbing except Socrates himself. What are you doing, my friends? he exclaimed. I sent away the women chiefly in order that they might not behave in this way; for I have heard that a man should die in silence. So calm yourselves and bear up. When we heard that, we were ashamed, and we ceased from weeping. But he walked about, until he said that his legs were getting heavy, and then he lay down on his back, as he was told. And the man who gave the poison began to examine his feet and legs from time to time. Then he pressed his foot hard and asked if there was any feeling in it, and Socrates said, No; and then his legs, and so higher and higher, and showed us that he was cold and stiff. And Socrates felt himself and said that when it came to his heart, he should be gone. He was already growing cold about the groin, when he uncovered his face, which had been covered, and spoke for the last time.

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Crito, he said, I owe a cock to Asclepius; do not forget to pay it.²¹ It shall be done, replied Crito. Is there anything else that you wish? He made no answer to this question; but after a short interval there was a movement, and the man uncovered him, and his eyes were fixed. Then Crito closed his mouth and his eyes.

Such was the end, Echecrates, of our friend, a man, I think, who was the wisest and justest, and the best man I have ever known.

²¹ These words probably refer to the offering usually made to Asclepius on recovery from illness. Death is a release from the "fitful fever of life." See, for instance 66b ff., 67c. Another explanation is to make the word refer to the omission of a trifling religious duty.

From F. J. Church's translation of the [*Phaedo*](#).

4. Socrates playlist:

https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLAy9_ExTWYSGRaUQRJJcOsqbJQ2cX1PF6